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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Kammerer, D. (2009). Police use of public video surveillance in Germany 1956: Management of traffic, repression of flows, persuasion of offenders. *Surveillance & Society*, *6*(1), 43-47. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v6i1.3403

Surveillance & Society

Research Note

Police use of public video surveillance in Germany from 1956: management of traffic, repression of flows, persuasion of offenders

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Introduction

Surveillance Studies are future-oriented, so it comes as no surprise that the early days of CCTV are largely ignored in academic literature. For the UK, Williams (2003) has explored the beginnings, but for Germany, academic research on the early days of CCTV is practically non-existent.[1] What follows is a rough sketch of the history of police video surveillance of public space in West Germany between 1956 and 1976. The focus is on CCTV in public space, other possible police uses of "industrial television" (e.g. visual communication among the police) have not been considered.[2] For reasons of length, this essay is by no means an exhaustive account of police use of video or image technology in these decades.

As is the case in Britain, police in Germany started using cameras and monitors as a measure in traffic control. In the 1950s, inner city traffic has increased dramatically. More and more traffic lights are being erected. However, this technology suffers a considerable disadvantage. It can only follow fixed programs and can only execute a limited set of commands: stop, wait, go. But the phenomenon of individual mobility turns out to be a persistently incalculable quantity – despite elaborate statistical surveys and the services of modern traffic computing machines or "Verkehrsrechneranlagen". With the help of "tele-eyes" or "Fernaugen" (Heinze 1964a), as the cameras were called, the police hope not only to better be able to keep track of the actual traffic flows and congestions but secondly also to solve a problem of control. By observing the TV monitors, the operator in the control room shall be able to decide in real time whether the pre-set programming of the traffic lights is adequate to a given traffic situation, or whether the lights shall better be remotely and manually controlled by a human operator.

The city of Hamburg was conducted a trial operation of a street camera system in 1956.[3] The system was presented to the local and national press in a media conference that took place in a small dancing hall. A police officer demonstrated to the press how he could switch a traffic light from red to green simply by pushing a button. The television set being used in this demonstration was called "Zauberspiegel", or *magic mirror*. Still, the Hamburg system was in operation only temporarily. It was in 1958 with the

[1] Although Weichert (1988) and Heinrich (2007: 159-161) can be considered as starting points.

[2] For examples of the German discussion of television as police instrument cf. Kraus (1954), Bartmann (1957), Claessens (1958), Wenzky (1958), Rose (1959: 110-116). Noll (1956) provides an overview of the technical possibilities of closed-circuit television in the 1950s.

[3] Cf. *Der Spiegel* (1956), Kraus (1956).

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http://www.surveillance-and-society.org | ISSN: 1477-7487

opening of a traffic control center in Munich, that camera lenses became a permanent presence in German public space (Rose 1959: 110) (Martin 1959). In 1965, the Munich system had expanded to nineteen traffic cameras or "Verkehrsfernsehanlagen" that put most of inner city traffic under observation (Luther 1965). All of these cameras already had pan, tilt and zoom functionality.

Hannover started using CCTV regularly as early as 1959, but only temporarily during the annual industrial trade fair, in order to cope with the increased inner city traffic. These cameras were not in use during the rest of the year. Their images were transferred to the control room via radio signals. In 1961 the Hannover police equipped a helicopter and a Volkswagen beetle with technology for recording and transmitting video images. The converted Volkswagen was in fact not being used at the fair, but at the big manifestations on the 1st of May (Birken 1962). In the following years, more and more big cites installed permanent traffic camera systems, among them Stuttgart, Hamburg and Nuremberg (Heinze 1964b).

In the 1960s, police propaganda for CCTV started to change. The cameras were now also officially no longer exclusively instruments of traffic observation, but they took over also *surveillant* and *sanctioning* functions. In 1960, the police in Frankfurt/Main put into service the first "photographic and automatic red light-surveillance", in order to investigate violations of traffic regulations. In addition to traffic control, the observation of rallies and public gatherings was the second task delegated to these camera eyes. Functions of traffic management and crowd control began to merge already in the design phase of the technology. In November 1964, the police force in Munich started using a mobile television recording vehicle, i.e. a car equipped with video transmission and recording technology (Heinze 1965) (Kistler 1965). According to the responsible police officer Josef Kistler, this new instrument was meant to provide the force with the ability not only to manage traffic, but mainly to transmit images from 'large gatherings of people, congregations in the open, also possible strikes, riots and the like' (Kistler 1965: 168). This mobile surveillance system, that was equipped with a video recorder and with televisual lenses, was meant not only as an aid in the deployment of police forces, but also as an instrument for securing evidence and to selectively identify individual "troublemakers". Kistler also expected the widely visible presence of the 32 ft high camera pole to exert a "dampening influence", a psychological-preventative effect for the "especially active demonstrators", who would rather "preserve their anonymity" (ibid.).

From management to repression

Kistler was enthusiastic about the new technology. He recommended using video cameras in cases of "riots, strikes, catastrophes, marches, and the like", hence in cases of events, in which the agglomeration of people and objects may lead to moments of possible danger and risk. In other words: What police officers observe on their monitors, are *dangerous mobilities* that must be controlled and contained. But whereas the increased inner city traffic requires instruments and measures which enable the police to *sustain* the flow of a movement (a strategy of non-interference), the surveillance of rallies and gatherings on the other hand aims on the contrary at *controlling* movements (the deployment of the police force, the movements of the demonstrators) and of *stopping* them if necessary. To sum it up: For the police, any accumulation of people and things carries a risk in itself, a germ of possible dangerous situation, that is averted only, when the anonymous and amorphous multitude becomes identifiable, becomes individualized by spotting the "troublemakers". In all of this, the police – at least Kistler – makes no difference between cases of emergency and catastrophes, the constitutionally confirmed right to gather in public or criminal rioting and disorderly behavior.

From 1970 on, the orderly functions of CCTV – in comparison to its use mainly as a traffic management tool – became more and more fore grounded until they are considered normal. The old pretence: "We need the cameras for traffic management" could now be unscrupulously discarded. It was replaced by bluntly repressive arguments. At this point, urban public space had already been permeated by private and commercial CCTV cameras, so that the police could open-heartedly make a plea for a permanent observation, without having to appeal to any special incentives, like demonstrations or similar irregular occasions. Traffic management became just one option among many possible applications for CCTV. In

December 1976 the police of Hannover, after years of experience with video surveillance during the times of the industrial fair, installed Germany's most up to date and most extensive CCTV system of its day, with more than twenty cameras at central spots in the inner city.[4] At the start of the system, Hannover police officer Walter Lüddecke promised "to get a televisual grip" on criminal and disorderly behavior, on pub brawls, prostitution, on bank robbery, on demonstrators and on street criminality. CCTV had finally become the lid that fitted on all kinds of pots.

How the persuasive force of the surveillance image constantly has to be regenerated

So far, two functions of the police cameras have been discussed: First, the *management* of flows or accumulations (cars, people). Secondly, the *control* and surveillance of accumulated individuals, combined with the possibility to prosecute and sanction actions considered illegal. Both functions are closely intertwined. In what follows, I want to address a third possible function of police photography and videography: Namely the *strategies of persuasion* by confronting the accused with visual evidence of his or her actions. The material I refer to for my argument are three articles published in 1956, 1973 and 1987 respectively in German police magazines. In these articles one can find statements by several high ranking police officers, which shed some revealing light on constellations of visual evidence.

1956: Reliving the occurrence

In order to be able to record violations of traffic regulation like speeding, in 1956 a police car with an in-built photographic device, the so-called "Traffipax", was put into service. Two years later, the police officer responsible for this project published an article on the results of this new technology:

How much more telling is the visual record of a traffic violation, if we compare it to the sober text of a police report! Not only can the facts of the case be presented in court with so much more vividness in front of the eyes of the judge. Also the psychological moment should not be underestimated. I have found that police reports made with the aid of the camera-car [the "Traffipax"] in general result in more severe sentences than the traditional non-illustrated reports. The judge arrives easily at his conclusions, because he can *relive the incident* recorded in the image, as if he were a car driver present in the situation. Furthermore, it seems common practice, that the accused in these cases only rarely file an appeal, because he very well knows, that he cannot present his case in any other way. (Müller-Berg 1958)

This quote distinguishes three different advantages of photographical evidence. First, a *phantasmatic immersion into the image*. Not only are the facts of the case presented more vividly in court. The judge shall even able to "relive" the incident, as if he were driving the car himself. Here, the photographic evidence is clearly worth more than the proverbial "thousand words". The whole situation has been transformed: the judge is no longer impartial observer; he has become the *participant* of a past event. In consequence, this secondly leads to an aggravation of the punishment. Where the bare, non-illustrated words, the verbal accusation, left open some room for doubt that corresponded with a restraint in the measure of the punishment, the clarity and evidence of the image results in an increase in penalty. As is well known, this correspondence between the form of the evidence – visually or verbally – and the severance of the penalty still is valid today. And thirdly, when confronted with the image of is actions, even the accused himself must drop all pretence, realize his mistake and plead guilty.

This single quote of course can give us only little insight in police practices of the late 1950s. But we can gain from it at least some insight, about the argumentative force of the photographic evidence and its role in police strategy. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the photographic image would so to speak always "have the last word". As my two further examples will show, the evidential force of the visual has a history and there is always a dialectical movement between *persuasion* and *skepticism*.

[4] "Fernsehmäßig im Griff", *Der Spiegel* 1-2, 1977.

1973: From "persuasive evidential force" to "lifeless record"

In the late 1950s, surveillance of traffic lights at cross roads was still mainly a manual task. Police officers took position near the traffic lights and wrote down manually in note books the number plates and other details of cars ignoring the red light. This strategy was soon criticized as "insufficient and unproductive" (Keller 1968). Many of the accused car owners were able to prove before court, that the written notes of the police officers were wrong in at least some of the details. This in consequence led to many acquittals. In order to improve the efficiency of the instrument, in 1954 police officers in Frankfurt/Main were being equipped with photographic cameras, to support the written field notes with visual proof. "The success was impressive", as Walter Keller (1968) states. "There were no more mistakes with regard to number plates or the type of car driven. In most cases, the accused car driver admitted being guilty right before the police officer. In the few cases were a hearing in front of the court was necessary, the evidence was convincing and most of the accused were convicted. "

And again: Thanks to the "convincing evidential force of the records" a court proceeding is in most cases considered unnecessary, because the evidence and the guilt of the individual is clear to see for everybody's eyes. Unlike a written statement, a photographic image cannot be deemed faulty or deficient, but is generally considered an objective representation of the state of affairs. And these facts are always presented by the police and always support the official police version of the incident.

But this *asymmetrical power of interpretation* was soon to be contested. In the early 1970s the situation had changed completely. Now, the majority of he accused car drivers refused to plead guilty on the spot, when confronted with a photographic image. What had happened? The photographic evidence was no longer undisputed. With the help of photographic experts and lawyers, the accused car drivers were able to convince the judges, that alternative interpretations of the images were indeed possible, i.e. that the visual evidence was in fact proving nothing at all. The imponderables of technology, a growing skepticism in public against the reliability of police photography, combined with the loss of the interpretation privilege on part of the police, threatened to make the photographic image useless as evidence before court.

The answer to this dilemma, of course, was technological progress: from still to moving image. In 1973 the police started to conduct trial runs with portable video cameras.[5] Traffic was recorded at several positions at the motorways. If a car driver was caught violating traffic regulations, the recordings could be played back to him on the spot. This new strategy lead to the well-known results: The evidence could not be disputed. Now the police considered still images to be "lifeless recordings" that could not keep car drivers from making false excuses in front of police officers. Moving video images, on the other hand, had a clear and undisputable "positive influence on the reasonability of the car drivers". When being confronted with the evidence played back on a monitor in the police car, the car drivers would accept all penalty notices "without any protest whatsoever". As a police officer observed: "We don't have to do much talking, the images convince everybody."

1987: relief from the burdens of ambiguity

In 1987, the professional police magazine *Die Polizei* published two photographs of a car driver, who is being shown video recordings of his violations (Krage 1987). The article comments the scene as follows: "At first, the car driver is watching with interest and astonishment his own driving behavior on the monitor in the police camera car. In spite of the undisputable evidence, he gets out of the car with a big smile on his face. This is not an exceptional case. It is a typical phenomenon testifying to the great psychological impact of this instrument." (ibid.) Not aggression or resentment, but reactions of "astonishment" and "interest". Instead of being defiant and stubborn, the accused car driver leaves the place with a satisfied grin on his face. If this reaction is really a "typical phenomenon" and not the exception, one might argue that videography is not only advantageous for the police officers who are preserving evidence, but also for the accused drivers – they are relieved from the burdens of ambiguity,

[5] Cf. "Buße mit Bild", *Der Spiegel* 2, 1973, 47.

'The evidence is immediately recognizable, and undoubtedly truthful. This clarity of evidence saves the accused the considerable and nerve-racking pains of going before court, since from the outset there is no chance of winning the case.' (ibid.)

Conclusion

The three examples presented here outline a sort of spiral of rearmament of visual control by repetition and intensification: the offender will be ›subjected‹ to his own image only if he is repeatedly confronted to it by increasingly advanced media technology. The evidential force of any image technology is relative: it wears down with the time. On the other hand, compliance with visual evidence can never be achieved permanently. Any new media technology carries *a persuasive force* with it that is inversely proportional to the degree in which individuals have adopted a knowledge about the technology themselves. As long as only few people had their own video cameras, video images seemed irrefutable. The increased levels of certainty, brought about by advanced media technologies (photographic camera – video camera – digital camcorder – radar, etc.), gradually erode or become deflated under the pressure of habituation and the increased media competence of the surveilled subjects.

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